

For one day, ask not

Do JFK honor of letting it rest



FATHER AND SONS visit the Eternal Flame that burns at the grave of President John F. Kennedy in Arlington Cemetery as the 30th anniversary of his assassination nears. AP

If America really wanted to give John F. Kennedy a token of its appreciation today, on the 30th anniversary of his assassination, how about we let him rest in peace?

While JFK was alive, his friends, the press and even most of his enemies allowed him a private life. What would have been quaintly called his "shirt-chasing," for instance, was not deemed an area of legitimate public interest.

Today, of course, the slightest whisper of skirt pursuit makes national headlines. The rules in 1963 are as far from 1963 as Jurassic Park is from Park Ave.

Alive, Kennedy was a President elected with less than 50% of the vote and besieged with the domestic and global crises of a fast-changing world.

Could his own party embrace both the South and the civil rights movement? Could he stand up to the Communists in Cuba and not back his words with bodies in Vietnam?

Discussions about the living John F. Kennedy centered on his policy toward steel price increases, or whether the Vatican was using a Catholic President to take over America.

But the moment he was killed, discussion shifted from the policies to the person. Some fixed him forever as a political con artist. Others enshrined him as the eternally young idealist whose legacy was to have summoned and stirred the noblest impulse in the American character ("Ask not...").

This was a normal, instinctive reaction to severe national trauma. But it soon became clear a more ominous force was also emerging, both among some adversaries and some admirers: a fascination which borders on the neurotic.



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CRITIC-AT-LARGE



ARLINGTON CEMETERY, Nov. 25, 1963. Veiled Jacqueline Kennedy is given flag that covered JFK's coffin. AP

For 30 years, a visible segment of American society has been sitting in a room obsessively picking through every detail of Kennedy's life. Tiring of that, it moves on to his death. Then back. Let's go over that Marilyn Monroe thing one more time, eh?

John Kennedy, and subsequently his whole family, have become American royalty, treated with precisely the ambivalence royalty would expect from a country which once fought a revolution to drive them out, but still likes the idea of a beacon for national style.

Thus we remain drawn to the coffin of the fallen king, whose presidency we call Camelot and to whose widow we offer regal deference.

Our current President, Bill Clinton, was elected to that office in part by his ability to evoke the legacy of Kennedy — both through an image of youthful freshness and an aging snapshot of a young Clinton actually shaking the legend's hand.

Yet Clinton, in a new Rolling Stone interview, complains with cold fury that the media focus not on his presidential achievements, but peripheral, smaller matters. This bitterness, it is safe to say, can be traced in part to published reports last year — unproven — that Clinton had chased a skirt.

What Clinton wants, really, is the JFK mantle, all the glory we have draped around the man, without the microscopic scrutiny which has played such a large role in keeping that mantle so prominent 30 years later. Sympathize with Clinton or not, that's one wish he's not going to get.

In any case, whether the Clintons or Gary Harts have been treated unfairly is another subject. In the case of JFK, 30 years after his death shattered his country, it should be simpler.

Since we now have a substantial body of work which analyzes the man and his presidency with solid, well-researched objectivity — most recently, a fine book by Richard Reeves — we should thank him for what he did and let him go. We could all use the rest.

DEALEY PLAZA, where President Kennedy was shot as motorcade passed Texas School Book Depository Building on Nov. 22, 1963, will be designated a national historic landmark today. Nellie Connally, widow of former Texas Gov. John Connally, who was wounded at the same time the President was murdered, will make official presentation of plaque. The ceremony will focus on "our responsibilities in a democracy to preserve both good and bad history," said Walter Blake, president of the Dallas County Historical Foundation. AP

